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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PARIS 003921

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [FR](#) [LE](#) [SY](#) [IR](#)
SUBJECT: FRENCH MFA NEA A/S-EQUIVALENT ON LEBANON,
SEPTEMBER 17

REF: BEIRUT 1421 AND PREVIOUS

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Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt for reasons 1.4. (b), (d).

¶1. (C) French MFA NEA A/S-Equivalent Jean Felix-Paganon reviewed with Polmincouns September 17 FM Kouchner's visit to Beirut during Kouchner's recent swing through the Levant. He provided little detail and began the discussion of Lebanon as a carryover from a preceding discussion of the peace process (septel) and Syria's role in it. Felix-Paganon stressed that Syrian conduct during the Lebanese presidential election process will be critical to determining what France does next with Damascus, including any serious French/Syrian reengagement. The one exception would be a meeting between Kouchner and Syrian FM Mu'allim in New York on the margins of the UNGA. (Comment: An earlier variant of this meeting was a reworking of the five-party demarche -- U.S., France, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Arab League -- Kouchner had once pushed. In the newer version, Kouchner would consult the other parties seriatim before a final "synthetic" meeting with Mu'allim in which he would invoke the other four parties. End comment)

¶2. (C) Turning to Lebanon proper, Felix-Paganon said that Berri pretended to be angry in his answer to March 14's response to his recent overture; Berri well understood that the majority's response was open and sincere. Felix-Paganon called the histrionics a show meant for others in the March 8 coalition. The French see Berri as worried about preserving his position, sandwiched as he is between Aoun and Hizballah, and determined to exercise to the maximum his prerogatives as parliament speaker. On the other side, Felix-Paganon described the French perception of tensions between hardliners against dialogue with March 8 and those taking a more flexible line favoring discussion. The French are convinced that active contacts are already well underway in the run-up to the reconvening of parliament September 25.

¶3. (C) As described by Felix-Paganon, the way ahead now consists of the parties groping toward a package deal, focusing on all their equities -- not just the Presidency. Especially given the post-Ta'if weakening of the Presidency, the Prime Ministry and the balance in the Cabinet are also of importance to both March 14 and March 8. That means there are quid pro quos that can be worked as the parties negotiate toward a formula involving the selection for the key offices and achieving the right cabinet balance. Asked if

Felix-Paganon was saying he thought the paralysis had been broken, with the parties moving into a new &package8 negotiation, Felix-Paganon hedged: this is where he would like things to move, he clarified, but he was not yet persuaded they actually would. He said he did not foresee possible agreement on a candidate prior to September 25) largely because the implication of such an agreement was Aoun's renunciation of his candidacy. He also doubted any of March 14's candidates would quickly emerge as frontrunners among what the French now call a process of achieving "convergence" as opposed to "consensus." One problem Felix-Paganon saw with March 14 was its apparent fixation on keeping control of the government no less than imposing its candidate on the presidency. As the debate over the identity of the next president inevitably merges with that of the composition of a new government, negotiations will become more complicated and focused on reaching a package deal. This will, according to Felix-Paganon, drag out the process and in all likelihood take us up to November 24. September 25, therefore, has limited significance but its imminence has started the bargaining among Lebanese in earnest.

¶4. (C) We asked whether the French thought Syria had been behind Berri's latest initiatives. DAS-equivalent for the Levant Ludovic Pouille responded that Berri was saying this was the first truly "autonomous" decision he had ever taken in his long political career. Felix-Paganon added that France believes Berri made his decision on his own. Syria has done nothing so far to contradict or challenge it, which it could have done easily through public denunciation if nothing else. He suggested that the announcement of candidacies will draw Syria into the game as candidates -- any and all -- start to dispatch emissaries to Damascus. Both Syria and Iran, in Felix-Paganon's analysis, seem content for the moment to let things play out and show no inclination to destabilize the situation in Lebanon.

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¶5. (C) We asked, for the record, if Cousseran planned to visit Damascus or Tehran in the near future. Felix-Paganon answered that there were no such plans for the time being.

¶6. (C) Comment: Significantly, and distinct from meetings in Beirut and Washington, Felix-Paganon did not feel a need to apologize for or clarify any divergence in terms of our approach on Lebanon despite our having made clear to the MFA our concerns. What was reassuring about Felix-Paganon's rundown, if we may use that term, is that the French seem to have slowed down or lengthened whatever time horizon they imagined for a resolution of this crisis. This seems to be allowing them to assess a bit more soberly the state of play and alignment of forces, including the need to regard Berri and his openings to the majority skeptically. French doubts about March 14 persist, however, as do fears about the situation sliding into chaos and violence.

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Stapleton